

Ethical Considerations for Health Systems Regarding Research on Self-Managed Abortion in Illegal Setting

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Abstract

Self-managed abortion (SMA) occurs across continents and sociodemographic, particularly in countries where abortion is legally restricted. Research on SMA in contexts where abortion is illegal presents unique methodological challenges, requiring careful consideration regarding how to access data, how to protect individuals' data in a criminalizing context, and how to navigate the dilemmas associated with revealing underground strategies and potentially exposing groups to further repression. This scoping review examines how researchers across the globe have studied and discussed SMA in legally restricted settings, revealing insights into how these ethical and legal considerations have been addressed, aiming to inform future SMA research. Using PubMed, Web of Science, Embase, and CINAHL to identify research, and Covidence to manage the review process, we conducted a scoping review of published research and screened 7,398 articles, identifying 115 for inclusion. A diverse range of papers, such as community-based studies, mystery client studies, post-abortion care studies, literature syntheses, and commentaries were included. Our findings indicate that the legal and ethical considerations involved in studying SMA are, in general, undertheorized and not widely discussed by researchers. This reveals a significant gap in the knowledge and tools necessary to study this important phenomenon within health systems in restrictive contexts.

Keywords: self-managed abortion; abortion policy; reproductive health; research ethics; research methods